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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to document the existence of the "reverse modeling" principle of television viewing behavior whereby children, rather than parents, determine the television viewing choices for family members. Through telephone interviews, 284 adult respondents were questioned regarding their knowledge of the television advisory warning system, its influence on their own or their children's viewing, their method of program selection, their definition of offensive content, and their estimated daily viewing time. In addition, each was asked how long the television remained turned on each day in their household. The sample was analyzed according to level of education (high or low) and presence or absence of children in the household. Although educational differences did not affect control over children's viewing, it was determined that in low-education households there was a relative lack of concern among parents about television violence; children tended to select programs by changing channels, rather than by consulting printed advertisements; the television set remained on for extended time periods; and parents watched television indiscriminately. (MAI)

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PARENTAL CONTROL OF CHILDREN'S TELEVISION VIEWING BEHAVIOR: SUPPORT FOR THE REVERSE MODELING PRINCIPLE

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Parental influence over children's television viewing has long been a subject studied by communication researchers. Himmelweit, et. al. (1958) discovered that British parents decided whether their children viewed television at all. Schramm, et. al. (1961) and Steiner (1963) both found that parental viewing behavior was emulated by their children. However, there was a greater tendency for the lower educated families to use television as a "baby sitter."

Thus, it was a commonly accepted belief that parents influenced the television viewing of their children, if not controlled it completely. Recent evidence, however, supports George Comstock's (1975:27) conclusion that "Television for young persons is an experience largely devoid of direct parental influence."

In a 1976 address, Elton H. Rule, President of ABC-TV, cited a Roper Poll of parents with children under 16, which determined that only about two-fifths of the parents questioned had rules about what programs their children could watch. Less than one-third of parents with children under 12 had established rules for their viewing after 9 p.m.

Greenberg, Ericson and Vlahos (1971) found considerable disagreement between the reports of ten-year-olds and their mothers as to the child's television behaviors and attitudes. Increased parent-child interaction did not result in more similar perceptions of the child's viewing habits (amount of viewing time, programs watched). Half of the 85 children studied reported that they had the most to say about what programs they watched, but less than one-third of their mothers concurred.

Analysis of Canadian families and their television viewing decisions by Wand (1968) reveals that roughly half of parent-child conflicts over program choice were decided in favor of the child. Likewise, parents and children did

not view together unless the program reflected a common interest; this did not occur as often as either parents or children viewing separately.

Thus, we seemingly have moved from complete parental control, to a free choice policy, to a tendency to have children be the primary decision makers of television program viewing. This conclusion could be reached through the analysis of data which early researchers interpreted as supporting parental control of program choice: the similarity of programs viewed by family members.

One could argue that the similarity between family members in media use is explained by reverse modeling. According to Chaffee, McLeod and Atkin (1971:326) this means that: "It could as well be that the child's media use influences the parent's, rather than vice versa." Likewise, former CBS-TV President Robert Wussler has recently concluded in a televised interview that "The eight-year-old turns on the TV and the parent walks into the room and watches what the eight-year-old has on instead of changing the channel."[1]

As suggested by earlier findings, education could be important in affecting this family viewing relationship. Kline (1971) found that education was a negative predictor of the amount of viewing time by families.

The study reported in this paper attempts to better document the existence of the "reverse modeling" principle for television viewing behavior by families. The viewing public was surveyed concerning their use of televised viewer advisory warnings as the basis for parental control over their children's viewing. More importantly, we wanted to determine if these statements which advise viewers that content dealing with a "mature theme" is about to be broadcast have an effect upon adult viewing behavior, also.

Method

Over a period of ten days (October 20-29, 1976), trained interviewers placed calls to 550 residential telephone numbers chosen through a systematic random sample of the Athens, Georgia telephone directory. 284 interviews were completed; there were 115 refusals, 35 numbers disconnected or out of service, and 116 numbers busy or not answered after at least two callbacks. The completion rate for all contacted numbers was 71%.

Respondents were first asked if they were familiar with the present television advisory warning system. Those who responded in the affirmative were asked if it had influenced their control over their own or their children's viewing.

Respondents were also asked about the type of content they considered offensive; they were asked to specify the content of which viewers should be warned in advance. If any of the following content areas were not named as unaided responses, subjects were then asked if a warning was needed for such content: explicit sex; explicit or excessive violence; explicit or aggressive language; or a mature program theme.

Respondents were asked to name the method they most commonly used in selecting television programs. They were asked to choose their selection method from the following alternatives: read TV Guide or newspaper listings; look at printed ads in newspapers; listen to on-air previews of upcoming shows; just flip between channels; or they could offer their own response.

Finally, respondents were asked to estimate their daily viewing time, and the estimated amount of time the television is turned on each day in their home.

The main subgroups used in analysis consist of high and low educated married couples, with and without children in the household. The low educated group (n=73) consists of people who, at best, graduated high school while the high education group (n=211) consists of people who have some formal schooling beyond high school. Respondents were grouped according to whether or not there was at least one child in the household; 106 households contained children, and 178 did not.[2]

The "reverse modeling" principle would be supported if adults within households with children were found to: have their viewing affected by advisory warnings, watch more television, have the television turned-on more than adults in households without children. Likewise, less "information-specific" methods of program selection, such as random channel-switching, should refelct less parental modeling behavior.

Results

Influence over viewing.

59% of low educated adults with children in the household who were familiar with the warning system reported that the warning statement influenced their own viewing decisions, while only 18% of low educated couples without children indicated that they were so influenced ($x^2=7.36$; $p<.01$). Among all married couples with children, 59% of the low educated indicate that the warning statement influences the decision to watch, as against 25% of the high educated parents ($x^2=9.26$; $p<.001$). Differences among high educated couples with and without children were insignificant, as were those among high and low educated childless couples. This finding supports the reverse modeling principle for low educated parents only.

- - Table #1 about here - -

High and low educated parents do not differ significantly in reported influence of the warning statement on their control over their children's viewing. 56% of low educated, and 68% of high educated parents indicate that the advisory warning influences their control over their child's viewing. The manner in which these two subgroups are influenced is similar as well: 77% of low educated, and 79% of high educated parents do not permit their children to watch television programs preceded by the warning.

Program content needing advisory.

High educated parents are much more likely than low educated to unaidedly name violence as an example of potentially offensive content of which viewers should be warned in advance; violence is cited by 62% of high educated parents, while only 38% of low educated parents name it as an unaided response ($x^2=4.26$, $p<.05$). No significant differences were found for sex, explicit/aggressive language, or mature program theme content.

- - Table #2 about here - -

Aided responses concerning offensive content, about which one should be warned, produce only one additional significant difference: low educated parents are more likely to categorize explicit/aggressive language as offensive content. 92% of this group did so, as opposed to 73% of the high educated parents ($x^2=3.52$; $p<.10$). There is a tendency, however, among all education and parent/non-parent groups to designate as "potentially offensive content" all examples cited in the aided response queries. 68% or more in each group did so.

Method of program selection.

There were no significant differences among subgroups on the one method most commonly used to select television programs for viewing. More than 40% of each subgroup relies on "TV Guide or the newspaper listings." It is interesting, however, to examine the secondary methods among subgroups.

Among married couples without children, "newspaper advertisements" follow in reported use. 22% of low educated, and 19% of high educated couples without children use "newspaper ads," as opposed to 3% of low educated, and 7% of high educated couples with children. Among households with children, for both education groups, "flipping channels" and watching on-air previews rank second. This indicates a more random search for programs within households having children; indirect support for the "reverse modeling" principle.

Television exposure

Education is a strong determinant of television exposure. For all respondents, the low educated respondent is most apt to personally view television ($x^2=25.25$, df=3, $p<.001$) as well as have the television turned on in total ($x^2=22.28$, df=4, $p<.001$), compared to the high educated respondent. This is in strong agreement with prior research (Kline, 1971).

The reported viewing within households with and without children is another area in which significant differences were found among the low and high educated. 34% of low educated parents report that they watch television more than four hours a day, as against 9% of high educated parents ($x^2=17.57$; $p<.001$). Within the low educated group, 34% of the respondents with children view more than four hours of television daily, while only 11% of the childless

couples do so (x^2=8.08: $p<.02$). Within group differences were not found for the high educated.

- - Table #3 about here - -

A similar subgroup difference carries over to the number of hours per day the television set is left on: 48% of low educated respondents with children leave the set on for more than eight hours every day, as against 16% of low educated couples without children (x^2=14.18; $p<.001$). This same relationship holds for high education households, with and without children (x^2=18.48; $p<.001$). However, low educated married couples without children do not differ as much from their high educated counterparts in the amount of time they leave the television set on (x^2=5.05; $p<.10$); 16% of the low educated leave it on more than eight hours per day, and 2% of the high educated do so.

- - Table #4 about here - -

Discussion

Our results show that education is a predictor of advisory warning statement influence upon the adults' viewing behavior, especially among parents: low educated parents were most likely to report such an influence. Low educated individuals were significantly more likely to be influenced than high educated unless they were childless. Therefore, it is the presence/absence of children in the low educated household which determines the adult's reaction to an advisory warning regarding their own viewing behavior. This finding is strong support for the "reverse modeling" principle, but only among low educated households.

Educational differences do not carry over to the actual control over children's viewing: no significant difference was found among low and high educated parents. A relative lack of concern among low educated, as against high educated parents over television violence could also indicate that this subgroup attempts to exert little parental control over viewing, even after being sensitized to this type of content via the advisory warning. The tendency for both low and high educated to agree (in aided responses) that warnings are needed for all types of content cited may mean that it is socially accepted behavior to agree to control.

The methods most commonly used to select programs bear examination in terms of "reverse modeling." When children "flip channels" in low educated households, or see on-air previews in high educated ones, this may preclude the need to consult newspaper advertisements. This would explain why newspaper advertisements rank highly in households without children, yet are of lesser importance when children are present. Again, this supports the principle that children exert an influence on their parents' viewing.

Nowhere is the child's influence over the parent more readily apparent than in the area of viewing time. Not only is the television set left on longer in households with children, it is the object of significantly greater adult viewing time in low educated households. The presence of children results in significantly more viewing by low educated parents, and this clearly supports the "reverse modeling" of television viewing principle. Thus, in low educated families, children are less likely to have an adult role model as a basis for controlled and/or systematic television viewing behavior.

Notes

1. Mr. Wussler made this comment while appearing as a guest on "The Phil Donahue Show" broadcast on WAGA-TV, Atlanta on March 23, 1977.

2. Only households containing complete family units are included in analysis. Thus, the 20 households with children and non-married adults, and the 117 households of non-married adults are not included in this analysis. Totally, there were 147 households which contained married adults with and without children. The exact groupings included: low educated, children (n=29), no children (n=18); and, high educated, children (n=57), no children (n=43). For some items less than a 100% usable response rate was experienced.

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TABLE 1

Advisory Warning's Influence

on Adults' Decision to Watch

(column percentages reported)

Influences Adults' Decision	Married with Children			Low Educated and Married		
	Low Educated (n=27)	High Educated (n=56)	Total (n=83)	Children (n=27)	No Children (n=17)	Total (n=44)
Yes	16	14	30	16	3	19
	(59%)	(25%)	(36%)	(59%)	(18%)	(43%)
No	11	42	53	11	14	25
	(41%)	(75%)	(64%)	(41%)	(82%)	(57%)
	$x^2=9.26$, df=1, $p<.001$			$x^2=7.36$, df=1, $p<.01$		

TABLE 2

High and Low Educated Parental Subgroups

Naming Content Needing an Advisory Warning

(unaided response, multiple responses accepted)

(% naming as needing advisory warning)

Content Categories	Low Educated (n=29)	High Educated (n=57)	Total (n=86)
Explicit/excessive violence*	11 (38%)	35 (62%)	46 (54%)
Explicit sex	12 (41%)	26 (46%)	38 (44%)
Explicit/aggressive language	4 (14%)	10 (18%)	14 (16%)
Mature program theme	1 (4%)	2 (4%)	3 (4%)
Other	1 (4%)	10 (18%)	11 (13%)
Don't know/no response	7 (24%)	5 (9%)	12 (14%)

*x^2=4.26, df=1, $p<.05$

TABLE 3

Hours of Television Watched Per Day by Married Adults with and without Children in the Household

(N=147)

Hours of Television Watched	Low Educated: With Children (n=29)	Low Educated: Without Children (n=18)	Low Educated: Total (n=47)	High Educated: With Children (n=57)	High Educated: Without Children (n=43)	High Educated: Total (n=100)
1 - 2	5 (17%)	10 (56%)	15 (32%)	23 (40%)	19 (44%)	42 (42%)
3 - 4	14 (49%)	6 (33%)	20 (42%)	29 (51%)	20 (46%)	49 (49%)
greater than 4	10 (34%)	2 (11%)	12 (26%)	5 (9%)	4 (10%)	9 (9%)

$x^2=8.08$, df=2, $p<.02$

$x^2=0.18$, df=2, n.s.

TABLE 4

Hours Per Day Television Set is on
in Households Containing Married Adults
with and without Children

(N=147)

Hours Television is Turned on	Low Educated: With Children (n=29)	Low Educated: Without Children (n=18)	Low Educated: Total (n=47)	High Educated: With Children (n=57)	High Educated: Without Children (n=43)	High Educated: Total (n=100)
4 or less	2 (7%)	10 (56%)	12 (26%)	21 (37%)	33 (77%)	54 (54%)
5 - 8	13 (45%)	5 (28%)	18 (38%)	20 (35%)	9 (21%)	29 (29%)
greater than 8	14 (48%)	3 (16%)	17 (36%)	16 (28%)	1 (2%)	17 (17%)

$x^2=14.18$, df=2, $p<.001$ | $x^2=18.48$, df=2, $p<.001$